THE IMPERATIVE OF LOVE
I John 4:7-12, 19-21
October 5, 1980 - World Communion Sunday

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Near the end of the first century, time began to run out for the original Christians. By the year 90, sixty years after the life of Jesus, people who had experienced His presence or heard His teaching or seen Him in the flesh were very old. In fact, there weren't many left. One of the oldest Christian traditions is that the last one of them, the last person alive who had seen Jesus was none other than John, the beloved disciple, and that the three brief letters near the end of the New Testament Canon which bear his name, are from his pen. Obviously that tradition cannot be substantiated, but it is a lovely one, and a plausible one.

Robert Browning used it as the setting for a poem, "A Death in the Desert". The elderly John is failing quickly and is attended by younger Christians who, themselves, are about to be martyred in the arena. The old disciple says:

> "...there is left on earth no one alive who knew (consider this)
> Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
> That which was from the first, the Word of life.
> How will it be when none more saith, 'I saw'?"

And so what the elderly disciple wrote is made significant by his sense that he was the last living witness. The prospects did not look good for the church at that point in time. Roman prosecution was beginning in earnest. Even more threatening to the Christian enterprise, however, was a Greek philosophy known as Gnosticism. The Gnostics were very bright. They taught that God is Truth and that right religion is learning the truth. That has always been an appealing idea. In fact, it is a very good idea. The problem Christian faith has always had with it is that it doesn't say enough. It remains too safely abstract. And so the old man countered: "God is not only a philosophic abstraction. He is not only light and truth. He is also love, a noun which is also a verb. He loves - and we know him, not intellectually, but wholistically, as we love. With uncharacteristic bluntness the author declares: "If a person says he loves God but hates his brother or sister, he's a liar." That's the bottom line. When you're about to die and you have to get the essence of it down in a sentence or so, this is what it sounds like: "...love is of God. He who loves is born of God and knows God." Notice, not he who is white, black, brown, red: not he who belongs to the right organization: not even he who says the right words, repeats the proper formula and has the prescribed conversion experience, but "He who loves..." It is imperative, not suggestive.

It seems appropriate on this day, World Communion Sunday, an occasion which celebrates the oneness of the human family, to lift John's imperative to love out of the text and place it in twentieth century context.

You are excused if you yawn when you hear a preacher announce that we live in a critical time. It's one of the favorite things preachers say in every age. Having heard us cry wolf so many times, it is understandable that the current version of the announcement fails to strike you as urgent. There is a difference in 1980, however. This time around the real prophets of gloom aren't the hell-fire evangelists but the economists and the environmentalists and the scientists and the political philosophers.

Alvin Toffler is saying that we are in the midst of one of three great revolutions in human history. The first occurred ten thousand years ago with the invention of agriculture. The second happened with the Industrial Revolution. We are at the beginning of the "Third Wave" now. What the future looks like, or whether there will be a future, depends entirely on the decisions we are making today. We are taking a "quantum leap forward".

I attended the Conference on the Future in Toronto this summer. Some 4,500 people from all walks of life, business, government, university, church, were represented. It was a stimulating but sobering experience. Futurists, in general, are very cautious about the human prospect.

Aurellio Peccei, founder of the prestigious Club of Rome, delivered a major address in which he made the following observations...

1. There are 4.5 billion people in the world today. 25% of them are below the poverty line by even the most generous criteria. By the end of the century there will be 6.5 billion people in the world.

2. Each of the 4.5 billion people in the world is sitting on the equivalent of ten tons of explosives. Every day 1.5 billion dollars is spent in the world arming against one another.

3. We have many good scientists working on the future. But 40% of them are working on military systems.

4. Four ecosystems are under major stress: oceans, forests, pastures, croplands - globally. At the current rate, all the world's rain forests will be gone in forty years.

When asked about his gloomy pessimism Peccei replied that there are more than 150 nation states in the world, each one of which continuing to behave on the basis of selfishness "Until that is resolved," he said, "there is simply no reason to be ~~helpful~~ hopeful." (See Through the Eighties, p.430ff).

And so the scientists and economists are sounding like the Old Testament prophets announcing the judgment of God on His wayward people. In fact the best theology I encountered at the Conference came, not from the theologian present, but from the Director General of the Conference, Frank Feather, editor of Business Tomorrow, a banker. Mr. Feather said:

> "We are all living on a tiny mudball which is spiralling through space. The sooner we all accept this simple but soberingly powerful reality, the better will be the future for the mudball and its various inhabitants."

The banker could easily have been preacher on World Communion Sunday when he told the delegates...

> "...we have to view each other as members of the same human family - we are one people...We must recognize the need for an embracing acceptance of the oneness of our race." (ibid., p.5-6).

The elderly John said simply, "Love is of God. He who loves is of God and knows God." And before that, even, our Judeo view of the human condition has consistently maintained that community, fellowship, relationship is our natural, God-given state. Our very earliest, formative stories tell about a primal family, created for one another, for life together, for a harmonious relationship with nature, living in a garden paradise. That same story suggests that our most serious fault is, quite simply, our inability to live together. The harmony is broken and shortly thereafter one brother slays another and the family leaves the garden. And if you don't get the point the Book of Genesis tells the story again a little later. This time all the people are together, building a tower, the result of which becomes a Babel of sound and the inability to understand or even talk to one another.

We need one another, the Bible maintains. Estrangement and isolation don't "feel" right to us because we have been created for community. The need to belong, to be wanted and loved, is intense in us. In fact, the psychologists tell us that we will do anything to belong. The strongest appeal of the cults, for instance, is precisely their ability to appropriate a sense of belonging. Upper middle class children give up everything they own, shave their heads, don saffron robes and live in monasteries - in order to belong to something.

My proposal this morning is a simple one. It is that the imperative of love is our only hope: that the only thing that can save us is the Gospel of Jesus Christ or something very nearly like it.

Watch
- Pobart

I don't know how you feel about the Missionary Movement, or the world-wide witness of the Christian Church. But I conclude that weak as it may appear, and remote as it may seem - it is the best hope there is. I conclude that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, understood and lived in the world by people, is the best and ultimately the only hope for the future. I do not mean that imperialistically. I do not believe we have the right to assume anything for people of other cultures and traditions other than God's eternal love for them also. I believe we are called - simply - to love - however and wherever we are.

I believe that this day celebrates the hope of the world. I do not mean to claim for ourselves total, uncompromising love. That, in its ecclesiastical expression, has contributed to, not helped heal, the world's fragmentation. I do not mean - in fact, I wish to disassociate myself from, a doctrine that presumes to know whose prayers God hears. I mean that, in a way I can't possibly articulate, I believe the hope of the world lies in a minority of us, joining hands around a common table, eating together, and affirming our oneness, our relatedness, our membership in one family.

That takes some hoping and believing and a little innocence and perhaps even a little foolishness. Things, after all, look pretty grim out there. But somewhere St. Paul told his detractors that God's people will always appear a little foolish; and the imperative to love will always seem naive.

And yet - it has been happening for nearly 2,000 years, under every conceivable hardship, in every war, in hidden basement meetings and high cathedral altars. Like a quiet counterpoint to the dominant theme of violence and hatred, people have been singing communion hymns for twenty centuries. And so they are today - in Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, and Peking and Moscow and even in Bagdad and Tehran...

Having heard and felt love's imperative, let us join them at table: all those who have gone before and all those this day, who hand in hand, represent the very hope of the world. Let us come to table.

Amen.

Lord God If all, forgive our divisions. Forgive our pride. Heal us. Make us one. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.